

Happy with Crocodiles

Her envelope had hearts where the *o*'s in my name should have been and I tore it open and read her letter right there in the sun. The V-Mail was like onionskin and in the humidity you spent all your time peeling sheets apart and flapping them dry. Two guys who'd been waiting behind me for their mail passed out and fell over. Our CO had orders to keep everyone under some sort of shade until further notice. That was it in terms of his responsibilities for the day. But the mail hadn't caught up to us since Port Moresby so even this one load pulled most of us out around the truck.

The guy next to me spat on the back fender just to watch it sizzle. As far as we could tell, we were the only four companies not getting any beach breezes, and we'd been sitting through this for two weeks and were pretty much wiped out to a man. Guys just lay in the bush with their feet sticking out onto the trail. The Bren gun carrier already looked like a planter, it was so overgrown. Almost nothing was running because the lubricating oils ran off or evaporated. We'd lost half our water when the heat dissolved the jerry cans' enamel lining. Two unshaded shells farther down the trail had exploded. The tents accumulated heat like furnaces. The mid-day sun raised blisters on an arm in ten minutes. One of the medics timed it. Everybody lost so much fluid and salt that we had ice-pick headaches or down-on-all-fours dry heaves and cramping. Turning your head wasn't worth the effort. Pickets got con-

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fused and shot at anything. A few facing the afternoon sun on the water went snowblind from the glare and didn't bother to report it until relieved.

At least the Japs were lying low, too. I had a palm-frond bush hat but even through that the sun beat on my head like a mallet.

The first paragraph was all about how good it was to hear I was okay. It made her whole day easier, apparently. The second said "To answer your question, no, I didn't see your brother when he was home on leave." But he'd already written that she had. And then he'd left it at that.

"Get out of the *sun*, Foss," the CO called.

One of the guys who'd passed out came to and staggered back to his tent. The other guy just lay there. The guy behind me got handed a Christmas package, but whatever was in it was smashed flat and melted besides. He picked over it standing in the truck cab's shadow.

The PFC dishing out the mail was clearly hacked off that he had to do it right there on the trail. There was one good patch of shade from a clump of coconut palms and no one was budging out of it to let him park his truck. He called a name and if someone didn't answer right away he pitched the letter or package over the side and went on to the next one. He was wearing a bush helmet and on the back of it someone had drawn a woman with her legs spread and written "Your Mother Says Hi" across the brim.

The third paragraph went on to something else as though that was the end of it. So-and-so said such-and-such about a friend of hers, could I believe that?

"What do you need, a road map?" my friend Leo said when I asked him about it.

"What?" I asked, like I already knew. "What do you think you think is going on?"

"What do I *think* I think is going on?" he asked, and the rest of Dog Company, a little ways farther off the trail, laughed. We'd heard that Baker and Fox Companies had been bombed with daisy cutters the night before, so we were working on two-man slit

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trenches, and in the close quarters entrenching tools kept whipping by people's ears. "I think the two of them spend a lot of time agreeing on what a great guy you are. I think it makes them sad for you and they cry together in their beer. And then I think he's sticking his dick in her."

"What's wrong with *him*?" our staff sergeant asked Leo while we redug our slit trenches the next morning. As if everybody else was the picture of contentment. If it rained at all during the night we lost like a foot and a half of depth to the mud.

"He's jealous of his brother," Leo told him.

"His brother better-lookin' than him?" the staff sergeant asked, amused.

"I've seen knotholes better-lookin' than him," Leo told him.

"Why would he think it was about looks?" I asked him later. "Why wouldn't he think I was jealous of something else?"

"Where the heck is *chow*?" Leo wondered. Guys were milling around the bivouac, waiting. You could always tell when a hot meal was late, because everybody started acting like zoo animals.

We were the Second Battalion, 126th Infantry, 32nd Division, Michigan and Wisconsin National Guard, here in New Guinea all of fourteen days and—leave it to the Army—apparently the spearhead of General MacArthur's upcoming drive to dislodge what everyone agreed were two divisions of the world's most fearsome jungle fighters from one of the world's most impenetrable jungles.

Two of us hadn't hit puberty yet. Three of us couldn't see without our glasses, and our hygiene officer couldn't see *with* them. Before this, only one of the Wisconsin guys had been out of the state. We were fifteen miles from the nearest hut and a hundred and fifty from the nearest civilization, in the form of the mostly uninhabited northeastern Australian coast. We were ten thousand miles from home.

We'd trained in South Carolina, which didn't prepare us much for jungle fighting but did its bit in getting us ready for the humidity. Any number of us couldn't keep up during the double-time drills, which meant we had to run around the entire battalion area

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three times with knapsacks full of grenades. At one point our unit was first in the entire camp in hospitalizations.

We just weren't crackerjack soldiers. Guys who panicked every morning about climbing into full field dress and getting their beds made in time for reveille and inspection started sleeping already dressed and under their beds. We were each scored on particular skills and then all classified as riflemen anyway and herded onto transports and shipped out. Once we got through the Panama Canal the ships were under orders to never stop moving, so anybody who fell overboard would have to take care of himself. We slept in the holds in canvas hammocks slung in tiers of four from the support beams. The top slot was so close to the metal ceiling that if you tried to see your feet you cracked your head. Everything smelled of socks or farts or armpit. Weapons were stowed in baggage racks and anything else got dumped on the floor. In the exact middle of the trip everyone was issued five dollars, a huge morale builder with the dice and card players. Some guys slept on deck because of the smell or because they figured they'd have a better shot of getting off if the boat was torpedoed. Like that would've mattered: all the cargo was high explosives. The whole stern hold was mostly gasoline in seventy-gallon drums.

We had one fifty-caliber mounted aft for protection. If we'd been attacked by three guys in a motor launch, we would've been A-OK.

We were only in Australia a week when we were told to pack up for New Guinea. We were playing baseball with some Kiwis when we heard. Leo was in the batter's box when they called the game. He dropped his bat in the dirt and said, "Shit. I can hit this guy."

When we got within range of the coast, the smell of everything rotting was so strong that we could pick it up before the shore was even in sight. "What *is* that?" Leo asked. We were all hanging on the cable railings. "That's the jungle," one of the LCT pilots told him. "What's *wrong* with it?" Leo asked, and the guy laughed. It was like you could taste the germs in the air. Nobody on deck wanted to open his mouth.

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It took our pathfinders an hour just to locate the trailhead that supposedly led inland. If you stepped five yards into the wall of leaves, you disappeared completely. All the barracks bags had to be left behind for the hump, so we carried only our weapons and ammo, knives, quinine tablets, mosquito lotion, canteens, and canvas water buckets. Everything else was left to the bearers. Our first night was spent in an old Aussie camp that was mostly a supply dump, camouflaged. Since Leo and I couldn't sleep we watched the natives file in carrying everything on poles on their shoulders. They looked scrawny, but judging by the loads they were plenty strong. I tried out some sign language on one. "You need something?" the guy asked when I finished.

They made their own pile and then went off the trail to sleep by themselves. Fifteen of them took like three steps and disappeared. Leo fell asleep too, finally. Then it was just me, listening to the bugs.

I got Leo's advice about everything. He was older, twenty-one, and had been in the Army for three years and Dog Company for two. We'd been friends since stateside. Or at least we'd gone off on passes together. He liked to say I spent the whole war surprised. Sometimes he enlarged it to life instead of just the war. "You know I ain't got a single friend?" he told me, like it had just hit him, the night we came ashore.

"What do you mean?" I asked him. "You got me."

"Yeah, that's right," he said after a minute, looking at me. Then he let it go.

The week we met he asked if I was a virgin, and when I told him no that's how Linda came up. He said, "So you've really done everything with her?" and for some reason I told him about all four nights. This was on the chow line and at one point I looked up and the guy ladling out the creamed chipped beef had just frozen in mid-pour. "You did all that?" Leo asked as we found a table. And I told him yes. Because I had.

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Linda was in my high-school geography class and my brother was two years ahead. We all drove around in her older brother's car and argued about whether Mineral Point was the deadest place in Wisconsin or the deadest place on earth. We did our drinking at the turnoff for the abandoned quarry and her brother always said you could do human sacrifice there and nobody would find it for a year and a half. One night after I got my permit he let us have the car and we drove out there thinking about what he'd told us. "I want to show you something," she said in this low voice once I'd turned off the headlights, then took my head with one hand and leaned me over and kissed me as if she was looking for something really carefully with her mouth and it was all the same to her if she never found it. "Like this," she whispered a few times, showing me how to make it even better.

"I think I need to show you something else," she whispered later, and pushed me back again and unbuckled my pants and pulled them down past my hips. She brought her head down to where my pants were. "Where's your brother?" she asked, like she was making conversation.

"I don't know," I said, not even sure how I managed to say that. "What're you *doing*?" I asked her, holding her shoulders and her hair.

She laughed a little and let me go. I could feel the wetness and the cold air. "Mmm," she said, and the warmth came all around me again.

I didn't know what to say. "Would you *marry* me?" I finally called out, with my eyes closed, and she laughed again.

The next time we went back I got protection from my brother and we did everything else. The third time I pushed her up against her door and she started making noises, too.

"Why'd you ask about my brother when we were out here that other night?" I said afterwards, when we were just resting.

"When?" she wanted to know. "With my brother?"

I had my face on her shoulder and she had a foot up on the dash. "No, alone," I told her.

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"I don't know," she said. "I don't remember." She sighed and shifted around and pulled me with her. The car seat underneath us felt soaked.

"So how'd it go, sport?" my brother asked when I got back. "Don't even tell me. I can see."

"So I hear you guys are going steady," he told me the next day after school.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked, though I was happy to hear it.

"Linda wants to know all about you," he said.

"Why doesn't she ask me?" I said. She'd given me a wave in geography, then disappeared with her friends at the bell.

"I guess because she wants the truth," he said.

"So what'd you tell her?" I asked.

"What do you think?" he said. "That she jumped the wrong Foss."

"What're you boys talking about?" our mom said, coming into the kitchen. She had a bowl of hard-boiled eggs to slice and she was going to line the bottom of her vegetable pie with them.

"Your son's talking about his new hobby," my brother said.

"Sounds like he's talking about a girl," our mom told him, shell-ing the eggs into a bowl.

"Where did you find time to talk to her?" I asked him.

"I like to think I don't wait for life to come to *me*," he said, heft-ing one of the peeled eggs and dropping it back into the bowl.

"Which one did you just touch?" our mom demanded.

"All of them," he said. He used both hands to smooth back his hair.

"She's my girl," I reminded him.

"I'm the one who just told *you* that," he said.

"So you *are* talking about a girl," our mom said. "What's her name?"

The cat wandered into the room and nosed at his dish. He sat down and we watched his tail do a few slow curls.

"I guess it's none of my business," she finally said to herself after looking back and forth at the two of us.

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"Your mom's funny," Linda told me the next time we were alone.

"How do you know *that*?" I asked her. I put her brother's keys up under the sun visor so they wouldn't jingle when we moved around the steering wheel. I had a little pillow she'd brought for the armrest on the door, and the car was making ticking noises in the quiet.

"I have my sources," she said, smoothing her cheek along mine.

"How often do you *see* my brother?" I asked.

"Every single minute of every single day," she murmured. Then she asked if I could do something for her, and explained what it was. While she waited for me to register what she was talking about, she pointed out that one part of me really wanted to, anyway.

It rained for a full day and everything that could come crawling up out of a hole did: mosquitoes, sand flies, black flies, and leeches. Leo went to clean out his mess kit and found a spider in the bowl clenched like a fist. Nothing got put on without first having been shaken and reshaken. Most mornings something fell out and we all did the stamping dance before it got away.

We took to using smoke pots and head nets for the mosquitoes. But then we couldn't eat. On one side of the trail the ants were so small that the only kind of netting that could keep them out would have also kept out the air. Ticks clustered in the pinch points in our clothes. In one slit trench, what we thought was smoke one morning turned out to be a cloud of fleas. Little pelletlike bugs even got into the C-rations. Cockroaches ate the glue in the field manuals. Termites collapsed the CO's field table and cot. We were told to splash or make noise when crossing the creek, because the aborigines said it was happy with crocodiles. By that, we were told, they meant lousy with them.

"So *noise* scares crocodiles?" Leo wanted to know while they were telling us this.

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“No, not really,” the guy giving the briefing confessed.

Some guys were so bored and hot that they sat in the water anyway. “I’m hoping one comes by,” Doubek, our radioman, said when we teased him about it. “Crocodile takes a piece of this ass, I got my ticket home.”

Everywhere you went, if you asked somebody how it was going, he said, “Sweatin’ it out, boy. Sweatin’ it out.” After a while that changed to, “Well, it won’t be long now!” Some of the officers thought the guys who said that were serious.

We had reason to be a little shaky in terms of morale when it came to the big picture. All during basic and the long boat ride over, there’d been nothing but bad news from this part of the world: we were told at least we had Rabaul and its naval base, though none of us knew where Rabaul was, and by the time we found out it had surrendered. They showed us a newsreel called *Singapore the Impregnable* the week before the Japs took it. Darwin was bombed. Jap submarines shelled Newcastle. “Isn’t that in *England?*” Leo asked.

“The other Newcastle,” a swabbie told him. We were on deck mid-ocean, lounging near the garbage dump on the stern. “Well, tell the Aussies help is on the way,” Leo said, picking through a crate of wrinkled oranges from the officers’ mess.

Apparently things had looked so bleak that the Aussies figured they’d just *give up* the northern half of their country, planning to draw their defensive line just above their southern cities. MacArthur supposedly talked them out of it.

Part of his argument, we were told, was that the Japs didn’t even have total control of New Guinea. Though it was only the terrain that left Moresby in our hands. No one could get over the mountains and through the jungle in any kind of fighting shape. All we had holding that side of the island was a Wirraway, two Catalina flying boats, and a Hudson minus its wing. When we came ashore some guys were working on the wing. They had one anti-aircraft gun. In the event of a Jap attack, they said, their orders were to hold out for at least thirty-six hours. When we exclaimed

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at that, they looked insulted and snapped that Rabaul had only held out for four. The news wasn't all bad, though: it turned out that if they depressed their anti-aircraft gun to its minimum elevation, they could also use it against landing craft.

When our barracks bags finally arrived they showed up slit open and looted. The CO said he wasn't going to report it because we'd only seem like a bunch of crybabies. I dropped my rifle into the creek and pulled it out full of sand and water, then spent two nights cleaning it while everybody else was sleeping. Leo found the hammock he'd shanghaied from the boat in the bottom of his barracks bag, and tried to rig it up to a tree and pulled the tree down. The tree was sixty feet high and as thick as he was. The rain forest was so dense it only fell a third of the way before it got hung up on the other trees. The whole thing was swarming with red ants. He said after he got out of the creek and started putting his clothes on again that the bites were like getting stuck with hat pins.

The aborigines came and went. When they wanted something, they did some work. They kept saying "Dehori." It was pretty much the main word of their language. It meant "Wait a while."

We got moved farther off the trail into denser jungle. Under the canopy, night fell so fast it was like you'd gone blind. Every so often some of us got to hike to the beach to pick up rations and lug water. Each trip we passed the same noncom from Graves Registration, just sitting around. That's how we knew there was a lot of fighting going on somewhere: he'd run out of forms.

Offshore, one of our old freighters had been bombed in half and waves were breaking over the bow, which was lying on its side. There was a wrecked Bren gun carrier at the low-tide mark, already half buried by the sand. There was no real harbor so the natives had to ferry all the supplies in on their outriggers, hollowed-out logs with two little poles connected to pontoons on both sides. Everything came in wet because the slightest weight shift capsized the hulls. The quartermaster running the show sat in a folding chair in shorts and a sleeveless sweater way too big for him. The last time we saw him he was trying to open a can of apricots with a

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bayonet. That night at sundown we hung around before heading back because they were supposed to be showing a movie on the side of the hospital tent, but the projector got bollixed up and the picture kept getting the jiggers.

My brother was in the Air Corps. He wasn't a pilot, but still.

"It's not like he's a pilot," I told Leo.

"Ever see their uniforms?" he asked me. "They got *wings* on their chest. They walk into a bar and the girls are all, 'What's it like to be up that high in the *air*?' What do they ask *us*? What's it like to dig a hole?"

He also got twice as many leaves as me. Every time he was re-assigned, I heard about another one. And every last time, he went home.

"He's a homebody," Leo shrugged. "He misses his ma."

"You're not helping," I told him.

"I don't see that as my job," he answered.

I only signed up because Linda was in tears one day and wouldn't talk about it. "So your brother enlisted, huh?" her best friend said when I asked what was wrong.

"Linda's upset about *that*?" I asked her.

"I'm just saying I heard, is all," she said, offended.

I tried for the Air Corps too, but washed out on account of my eyes. Even though I hardly ever wear glasses.

The next day I signed up for the Army National Guard, just in case there was a chance to stay stateside. "I'm goin' away," I told Linda outside of school.

"I know. Everybody is," she said. Then she gave me a huge hug, pulled back to look at various parts of my face, and kissed me, right there in front of everybody.

That was at the beginning of the summer. I had a few weeks before I had to report, but for most of them her family was off at their house on the lake in Michigan.

"So have you brought up marriage?" my brother asked me the



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night before he left. I was due to report two weeks after him. You couldn't talk to our mom about it. She was so upset the cat refused to come out of the cellar.

"Marriage?" I said.

"I didn't think so," he said.

"You think I should bring up marriage?" I asked him later that night, out on the porch. It wasn't so much a porch as two steps, but we called it the porch.

"That's all your mother needs to hear," he said.

Our father was trying to calm her down in the living room. That's how he spent most nights at that point. He wasn't happy about it. Whenever she stopped for a minute you could hear the radio.

"I don't think I'm ready to get married," I said. But the minute I said it I thought, *But I do want to be buried with her.*



Clouds came over and turned black and it rained for three straight weeks. "Where're all the *birds* going?" our medic asked right before it started. The trail washed out. They started calling the turnoff to the beach the Raging Rapids. The main forward-supply depot was a lake. The first downpour was like a train coming through and beat at our shoulders and bounced in huge sprays off our helmets. Four days into it our clothes started rotting. Whatever we carried in waterproof bags was soaked. Whatever we carried in watertight containers was mildewed. Tent supports collapsed, trenches filled in, bridges were washed away. The mud got into mess kits and stewpots and underwear and eyes. Guys walked through some areas by holding on to ropes tied tree-to-tree. Everywhere you put your boot you sank in. Every so often someone would pitch into a flooded slit trench. Shoes were gardens of green mold around the insoles. Field telephones corroded. Insulating material rotted. Batteries ruptured and leaked. Rifle cartridges rusted. Ration cans when opened already stank.

We had one day when it was cloudy and then thirty-six more



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days of rain. Everybody was covered with rashes, sores, blisters, bubbles, boils, and bites. Guys got tropical ulcers, dysentery, pneumonia, and scrub typhus. The skin under married guys' rings got infected with fungus. Our toes turned black and looked fused. The medics called it jungle rot. The rule was that only a temperature over 103 moved you to the rear. The mud sucked the soles off our boots. Everybody just squatted or sat in the rain and shook. Guys with dysentery tried to stay on sloping ground.

On the thirty-seventh day we got the news we were moving up. Doubek, sitting up to his neck in his flooded slit trench, cheered.

"What do you think, we're going somewhere where it *isn't* raining?" Leo asked.

"Who knows when it comes to this screwy country?" Doubek said.

About sixty percent of us were still fit to walk somewhere. Everybody had given up on raingear a long time before. Nobody carried packs but a lot of guys stuffed C-ration cans into their hip pockets. On a little patch of high ground we dumped in a pile everything we wanted carried and the native in charge divided the loads among the bearers while we watched. When the rain was at its worst he sometimes cupped his hands around his mouth and chin and just drank.

Our jumping-off point was apparently six miles away. The sooner we got there, the more time we'd have to hunker down and get a hot meal before moving forward.

Most of the way we had to march alongside the trail, a knee-deep river of glue. Every so often you'd see guys working together to try and pull something loose from the middle of it, like it was flypaper.

By an hour in we were stumbling along blind, just trying to keep our bodies focused on the next step. Other companies with nothing to do came out of their bivouacs to watch us go up the line. By two hours in, those of us in the back of the column started passing guys up front who'd fallen out. We'd started at first light

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and by nighttime we still weren't there and a third of the unit was back behind us. For dinner they handed around boxes of cold canned hash and hard biscuits. When you took a spoon of hash the space in the tin filled with rainwater. Everybody slept where they came to a halt. The CO slogged around for a head count and figured we'd lost forty-five percent of those who'd been able to march. The next morning the major he reported to told him that we'd ended up with the best mark of the battalion.

There were a lot of units around us, packed into not much space. I recognized the PFC who'd been dishing out the mail. While we were waiting, more and more of our stragglers stumbled in. A trail in front of us ran up a hill and disappeared. From the other side, even over the rain, we could hear the occasional small-arms fire. People were cleaning their guns as best they could and hoarding clips. A couple guys threw up and it washed away as soon as it hit the ground. I upended my helmet for a drink. While it filled I threw in a few halazone tablets just to be safe. "Think there are germs in this water?" I asked Leo.

"About nine fucking million," he said. He did this thing with his hand like he was wringing it in the rain to dry it off. The mud was so fine it outlined his fingerprints. He cupped his hands and splashed himself. Cleaning his face seemed to make him feel better.

Twenty minutes, the CO announced. We were to be the first assault group. We didn't know where we were headed besides that hill, but our platoon leaders apparently did.

Everyone was sitting cross-legged with his rifle in his lap. The mess sergeant went around with a C-ration stack and guys took what they wanted for breakfast. I had a cold can of beans and sat there mashing them between my molars. Leo chewed on his thumb. We could see G for George, the battalion's heavy-weapons company, trying to find stable spots on the slope for their mortars. Whatever we picked up—our spoons, our bloc clips, everything covered in mud—got even greasier from all the cleaning oil.

We were National Guard recruits from Wisconsin. Our uni-



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forms were rags, our boots sponges, our rifles waterlogged. We'd never been so tired in our lives. Everybody was sick. No one was talking. All of us were crouched over our weapons. I remembered how amazing it had been to think, when I first saw this place, that some of us were going to stay on it, dead.

"Biggest drunk of your lives, all of it on me, once we're off the line," the CO called out. He and the lieutenant shared a little waterproof map and kept looking up the slope and then back at the map.

"Drinks on the CO," the lieutenant agreed. Our staff sergeants went from group to group, checking weapons and whacking shoulders.

When I was a kid my dad was always off working for the CCC, mostly putting up power lines around the southern part of the state. He did some fence construction and tree planting, too. He was one of the oldest guys there. He worked forty hours a week for thirty dollars a month, with twenty-five of it sent home to the family. He had to wear a uniform and live in a camp during the week. He got up to a bugle at sunrise and only came home on weekends. He said the sign over the main gate read "We're Here to Lick Old Man Depression." "Lick him where?" he said when my mom quoted it to some friends they had over. She shushed him. After that he got a job building roads, but didn't get home much more often. And one night around Christmastime he came home late with frostbite on his feet. Just a little bit, but he was still mad about it. I was seven and my brother was nine. Our dad was sitting with his feet in a pan of water while we sat there watching him. Our mom was somewhere else, staying out of the way. There were Christmas carols on the radio. He looked at us from top to bottom and bottom to top like he hadn't found anything yet that looked the way it was supposed to.

"What's the matter?" my brother finally asked him. I was amazed he'd found the guts to do that.



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My dad sat there and didn't say anything. We all listened to my mom empty the pan from under the icebox.

"What's the matter?" my brother asked again.

"What's the matter?" my dad said, exactly the same way. It made my brother tear up. One of the Christmas carols ended and another one started. Finally we couldn't stand how he was looking at us. My brother left first, but I hung around for a minute, to see if it was just my brother or the both of us he hated.

With five minutes left we were told we weren't going yet. There was some softening up that was supposed to have happened ahead of our attack, but all we could hear was the rain and the *kekekekek* sound that the geckos made. Word was that the mortar shells were still stuck somewhere down the trail and nobody knew what was up with our artillery. We weren't happy about waiting but were even less happy about going.

"So what are you going to do about this Linda-and-your-brother thing?" Leo said. "I mean if you're not dead."

My stomach was barely keeping itself together. I was taking deep breaths to help with that. "You know what I sometimes wonder?" I finally asked him. "How does she know so much about doing it? Where did that information come from?"

"Oh," Leo said, raising his hand, "I think *I* know."

While we sat there the CO told us we were headed for a foot track over the Owen Stanley Range through the Gap. This range was one of the steepest in the world and divided the island in half. The staff sergeants told us to dump anything nonessential because whatever we took was going to be on our backs the whole way. Doubek inverted his pack and it turned out he'd collected twenty-eight cans of sliced peaches. He figured he could carry six and started trying to eat the rest right there. "One thing the American Army's never going to run out of," Leo said, watching him. "Canned fruit."

We finally got the go-ahead even though the rain hadn't let up

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and there'd been no artillery. "What happened to the softening up, sir?" Leo asked the CO as he passed our position.

"The thinking now is that we're going to take 'em by surprise," the CO called back. He got everybody moving and we all climbed a preliminary hill, slipping and sliding. No one could keep his head up without losing his footing.

At the top everyone was already beat, but on the other side of a little swale we could see our path climbing up into the clouds. The occasional scout was slithering down the slope in our direction. Where the trail went was cut off by the same clouds that were raining all over us.

It took us about an hour to get organized at the base and ready to climb. Three porters were coming along to hump the extra ammunition until we came under fire. The CO let us rest for a half an hour and then got us going again. The slopes kept sliding out from under us and the porters got a bang over how bad we were at keeping our feet. In places where the mud was covered with leaves a guy would manage maybe one step before falling and taking the next three guys down with him. "Heads up" meant "Catch whoever's sliding down at you." We took breaks on our hands and knees with water streaming over our wrists.

I started throwing up and tried to do it on the side of the trail. We passed abandoned emplacements so well camouflaged that a couple guys fell into them. A little farther up was a switchback and a curtain of jungle that came down like a wall. We came across some sulfa packs and morphine needles scattered in the mud. A boot.

From below Leo tugged at my pant leg. "Hang back," he said quietly. I stepped a foot and hand off the trail and rested, chest heaving, and let a couple guys go by. Leo stopped behind me.

"How far's this fucking thing go on?" Doubek panted, climbing past. He lifted his head to see and the jungle up above us went nuts. The wall of leaves jittered and blurred and the noise of all the fire at once was a pandemonium.

Doubek's shirt came alive from the inside and he spread-eagled

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out past me and pinwheeled down the slope, crashing through the undergrowth. His helmet sailed off in another direction. We all gripped the mud, hugging the slope. Leaves, sticks, bark, and splinters flew and spun, popping from trees. The noise sucked the air out of us. It stopped my ability to think. I was under a little lip of overhang with Leo below me. My boots kicked through a mat of stems. Thorns tore at my cheek. I was clawing and looking to burrow. Some guys were firing back but I wasn't one of them. The firing went on and then it stopped in front of us and after a minute you could hear the CO screaming to cease fire.

When the last of our guys did, the sound of the rain came back. And some whimpering and cursing. The CO and one of the staff sergeants shouted orders. Leo had to crawl up and over me before I could bring myself to move. He thought I was dead.

"How is he?" the CO called up to him.

"Untouched," Leo called back down.

"What about the other guys?" the CO wanted to know. I could see him twenty feet below us, one shoulder dug in, his outer arm cradling his carbine. Every so often he had to stick a heel back in the mud to keep from sliding. He meant the guys ahead of me. There'd been about six of them.

Leo told him none of them was calling for a medic, which he took to be a bad sign.

We could hear the clatter of new clips being fed into guns up above us.

"Should we fall back, sir? Sir?" Leo called.

"Form on me! Form on me!" a sergeant called out below.

"Fall *back*?" the CO called. "What's the problem? We ran into Japs?" I think he thought he was funny.

We were flattened against the muck, the mud and rainwater pouring straight through our clothes.

"Keep an eye out, you two," the CO called. Then he called a meeting on the slope right below us: him and the lieutenant and a couple of the staff sergeants. He asked for suggestions. Nobody had any. Could we spread out? one of them finally asked. Could we

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provide any covering fire? Was there any room anywhere to maneuver?

“This is depressing,” Leo finally said to me, after they’d all gone quiet.

“That might be the one trouble spot, though,” we heard the CO venture to guess. “It could be that we only have to get past that.”

“You all right?” Leo asked me. His nose was next to mine.

“You guys *watchin’*?” the CO called.

We both looked up at the switchback. Even in the rain the mists were creeping around the bottoms of the trees. We still hadn’t seen a Jap.

“They’re not going to let us go back down, are they?” I asked Leo. I’d never been so cold in my life and started shivering the minute the shooting stopped. I hadn’t meant to be crying but I was.

“Think of it this way,” Leo said. “Linda’ll be taken care of.”

“*Fuck* this place,” I told him.

“Yeah,” he told me back.

The third or fourth night we all drove around in Linda’s brother’s car, I’d walked over to her house but her mom said she was still getting dressed. I was welcome to wait, she told me, there in the parlor or out back with Glenn. Glenn was the older brother. Glenn it turned out was in the shed. “How’re you doin’,” I said to him.

“What’s it *look* like I’m doing?” he said back.

Stuff like that happened every single place I went. “Marble mouth,” my dad would say to my mom at the dinner table when I asked a question. “I understood him perfectly,” she sometimes said, but then he’d be mad at *her* the rest of the night.

“Leave those alone,” Glenn said.

I didn’t see what he was talking about. There wasn’t a lot of light in the shed. “You been *trapping*?” I asked when my eyes adjusted.

“Those are cat skins,” he said. “I’m drying cat skins.”

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"Your brother's drying cat skins," I told Linda the first night we had the car to ourselves.

"What are you *talking* about?" she said. And I decided it was the last time I'd ever bring up something that would make her move her hand away.

"What do you think, *your* brother's Mister Normal?" she asked.

She told me I could ride in front with Glenn and we'd gotten a block from her house when she asked what my brother was up to. "Let's go get him," she said, before I answered.

"Yeah, let's go get the brother," Glenn said.

When we got to my house my brother was already sitting on the front steps. "Well, this is a surprise," he said, and got in the back with Linda.

"Eyes front, buddy," Glenn said when I turned to look back at them. The whole way to the quarry, if I started to turn around he jiggled the steering wheel and we all rocked and swayed. Linda told him to stop and he told her it wasn't him, it was me, so she told *me* to sit still.

"I want to look at you," I said.

"That's sweet," my brother said.

"It *is*," Linda told him.

When we got to the quarry, she said she had to pee.

"I better go with you," my brother told her. "It's pretty dark out there."

"No, thank you," she said. "I can handle this myself."

She was gone a long time. I sat in the car with my brother and Glenn and thought of her poking around in the dark, feeling for a safe place.

Glenn had his arm along the top of the seat so his fingers were at my shoulder. My brother whistled to himself the same two notes that went up and down, up and down.

"What I wouldn't give to be a little flower right now," Glenn said.

"Two little flowers," my brother said.

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“I should go look for her,” I told them.

They both snorted. “She knows this place better than we do,” Glenn said.

“Or at least as well,” my brother told him.

I tried a few sentences in my head and then said, “So you guys have been here before.”

There was a pause like they were deciding who was going to answer.

“We been here before,” my brother confirmed.

Linda finally appeared out of the dark, wet-eyed, and opened the door and climbed in.

“You okay?” I said.

“Absolutely,” she said.

“Shouldn’t *I* be in the back with you?” I asked.

“Yeah, absolutely. *Move*, you,” she said to my brother.

“Absolutely,” my brother said.

“Absolutely,” Glenn said.

In the light when the car door opened again I could see Linda flinch.

“We gotta give these two some time alone,” my brother told Glenn.

“Absolutely,” Glenn said.

“But first I have to show you something,” my brother said, meaning me.

“Now?” I asked him. I had one foot in the backseat.

“Don’t go now,” Linda said. She had her back to her door and was holding out some fingers to me.

“C’mon, chief, this’ll only take a minute,” my brother said. “I need to *ask* you something.”

“This doesn’t feel right,” I said.

“It’ll feel right once you’re back,” my brother said. “Five minutes. Then we’ll clear out and it’s all you and her.”

Linda had lowered her arm and was looking out the back.

“*Five minutes*,” my brother repeated.

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I got out. He led me down a trail. I looked over my shoulder before we went around some rocks and saw Glenn opening his door.

It wasn't five minutes. It was more like twenty. What my brother wanted to ask was if I thought our dad was getting worse. If I thought he was drinking again. "I didn't know he was drinking in the first place," I told him. "You dragged me out here to tell me that?"

Linda was alone in the car when we got back. "Where's Glenn?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"How long have you been here by yourself?" I asked.

"He just left," she said.

"I'll go hunt him down," my brother said. "You two behave while I'm gone."

I got in next to Linda but her face was wet and she didn't shove over so half of me was still hanging out the open door. I braced myself with a foot in the dirt. "What's the matter?" I asked. "What happened?"

She nodded and smiled and wiped her eyes and said she was okay, that sometimes she got happy and sad at the same time. I was going to ask her again what happened but she scooped over and patted the seat where she'd just been and told me to shut the door. She brought her face closer and wiped her mouth with her fingertips and said, "Do something for me. Show me how much you want to kiss me."

"What are you *sad* about?" I asked her later.

"If I thought you really wanted to know, I'd tell you," she finally whispered. And we lay there for a little while, me holding on to her, her holding on to me.

"See what I mean?" she finally said.

"Why do you think Linda was crying tonight?" I asked my brother after they dropped us off. He and Glenn had given us a half hour, then hopped in the front seat and driven off without even asking us if we were ready.

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It looked like the question bothered him and I had to ask him again before he answered me. "I think she feels lucky to be with you," he said.

"I don't think that's it," I told him.

"Don't you feel lucky to be with her?" he asked.

I do, I thought that night, lying there in bed. *I do*, I thought, every miserable night on the troop ship, and in the slit trenches, and listening to Leo talking to himself as soon as he thought I'd fallen asleep.

We waited the rest of the afternoon for the artillery support. I spent an hour watching rainwater pour off vines and creepers alongside the trail. In the rain we only knew the sun had gone down when we realized we couldn't make out each other's expressions. Word came up the line to dig in, so Leo slid back below me to his old spot and started going at it with his entrenching tool. He was always the first man in the company to finish his hole. He had it easier than I did because he was shaking less and was more off to the side. With all the water coming down the trail it was like rerouting a waterfall. By the time I was finished I was sheltered enough from the main flow that it missed my head and shoulders.

The rain started to let up and every so often the clouds and mist cleared and I could see black peaks high above us. I'd shake and then settle down, shake and settle back down.

Pretty soon it would be dark. Anything we tried to do besides sit tight would be blind and probably of no use. I would be the perimeter. Maybe Leo would be too. When they came down the trail they'd be coming over us first.

We'd all heard the stories of how quiet they could be, creeping through the timber, easing over rocks drenched in rain. They had special rubber boots with separate big toes. They had night-camouflaged bayonets with serrated top edges.

They could see where we couldn't. Once they were on top of me they'd see bodies all the way down the hillside. Guys who were

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all mud, bearded to the eyes. Guys who could barely move. Guys who hadn't asked to be there but if left alive the next day would get to their feet and follow the artillery in and try to kill as many Japs as they came across. Guys who'd think, *The way they are, they deserve it.* Like the Japs who'd crouch over Leo and me. When they rolled us over they'd be shocked to see what we'd come to. Shocked to see what they'd done. Shocked to feel the ugliness we felt every single day, even with those—especially with those—we cherished the most.